



WATER QUALITY UNIT  
EPA REGION 8

## THE WATER QUALITY STANDARDS PROGRAM:

### SETTING THE GOALS FOR CLEAN, HEALTHY WATERSHEDS



**Water quality standards for rivers, lakes, wetlands and other surface waters play a key role in safeguarding water quality in EPA Region 8. Appropriate and protective standards are important to the success of many related water quality programs. They provide a legal basis for regulating certain activities, and they are used to identify impairments and prescribe solutions for a wide variety of unregulated pollution sources. Standards provide the foundation for achieving the Clean Water Act goal of restoring and maintaining the physical, chemical, and biological integrity of the Nation's waters.**



#### Public Involvement

States and authorized Indian Tribes are required to hold public hearings on their water quality standards at least once every three years. Public hearings provide an opportunity for citizens to make recommendations and submit information regarding proposed revisions to standards. States and Tribes are required to prepare and make available a responsiveness summary explaining how each comment was

### What are Water Quality Standards?

Water quality standards are laws or regulations that consist of four principal elements:

- (1) attainable **designated uses** for each water body segment (e.g., aquatic life, recreation, water supply, and agriculture),
- (2) **water quality criteria** to protect the designated uses (e.g., numeric pollutant concentrations and narrative requirements),
- (3) an **antidegradation policy** to maintain and protect existing uses, high quality waters, and outstanding national resource waters, and
- (4) **policies and procedures** addressing how the standards are to be applied or implemented (e.g., antidegradation, low flows, variances, mixing zones).

### What are Some of the Current Issues?

EPA Region 8 States and Tribes are now working to establish:

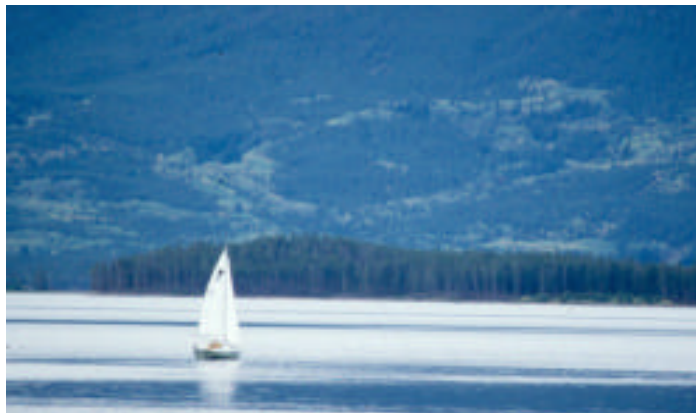
- “fishable/swimmable” uses or use attainability analyses,
- updated numeric criteria reflecting the latest scientific information,
- antidegradation and mixing zone methods,
- nutrient criteria for lakes, reservoirs, rivers, and streams,
- standards to address water quality effects of coalbed methane development,
- more appropriate standards for low flow streams, and
- biological criteria and assessment methods.

### Why and How are Water Quality Standards Revised?

Updates may be needed due to changes in water quality or new scientific information on the effects of pollutants in the environment. In preparing proposed revisions, States and Tribes consider requests from industry, environmental groups, and the public, and review EPA guidance. Each State and authorized Tribe has its own procedures for adopting revisions. In general, draft revisions are developed (this may include a stakeholder work-group process or public meetings) and then formally proposed for public comment. One or more public hearings are held. Typically, a politically-appointed Board or a Tribal Council makes the final decision regarding which revisions to adopt.

### Who Adopts Standards?

Water quality standards have been adopted by all six States in EPA Region 8 pursuant to the requirements in § 303(c) of the Clean Water Act (CWA). States have direct statutory authority to adopt standards (EPA does not delegate the program). Consistent with § 518(e) of the Act, the Region also has authorized the Salish and Kootenai (Flathead Reservation) and the Assiniboine and Sioux (Fort Peck Reservation) to adopt standards, and both Tribes now have adopted standards that EPA has approved. Other Indian Tribes have expressed interest or begun work on water quality standards.



### What is EPA's Role?

EPA Region 8 Water Quality Unit staff participate actively when States or Tribes review their standards to provide technical assistance as needed and to ensure that federal requirements are fully addressed. The Unit also develops guidance documents on priority issues. Once adopted revisions are submitted for review, the Regional Office must act to approve or disapprove the revisions. Some approval actions require consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service per Endangered Species Act requirements. Only the EPA Administrator has authority to promulgate federal standards (e.g., to correct deficiencies).

*For more information on water quality standards, go to <http://www.epa.gov/region08/water/wqs/html> or contact Bill Wuerthele at (303) 312-6943 or David Moon at (303) 312-6833.*